

## Paint Over Walls Or Paradigms?

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, April 18, 2011



*Graffiti abatement in San Jose costs the Parks & Rec department \$1.7 million per year. Local residents occasionally chip in to help.*

I attended the District 5 (D5) community budget meeting last week—it was the third D5 community budget meeting I’ve attended. Approximately 50 people were there, with the majority being city employees. Many of the speakers shared emotional testimonials.

One speaker stood out to me. She shared how cutting of library hours from 4.5 days to three days a week would cause a large burden to her neighborhood. She teaches music at the Hillview Library and is close to the youth who rely on the existing library. She said keeping library hours open in her neighborhood was important since she feels her neighborhood has a higher need than other areas.

This theme was prevalent. Another woman brought up that since D5 has a higher crime rate, then why not keep D5 libraries open and close District 10 (D10) libraries since crime is low there? I have asked the same question before. Should library hours be based on need? How do we determine the need? Crime stats? Census data by race and income?

Another person was concerned about the police layoffs and how they need more police in D5. Truth is we do allocate more police to D5 than D10, for example. Since there are more calls for service in D5 than D10 our police force plans accordingly.

Another felt D5 had not gotten its fair share of capital projects compared to other districts. This one would take some research but I think it is fair to say between the Redevelopment Agency spending through the Strong

Neighborhoods Initiative (\$105 million for a third of San Jose), Fire Station 2, Mayfair Community Center, Alum Rock Library, Hillview Library, Mexican Heritage Plaza, to name some projects, the last 10-15 years was better for D5 than the previous period of historical neglect.

The other major issue of the night was the option of outsourcing to save money and retain a city service. The one that got the most discussion was outsourcing the anti-graffiti painting currently performed by city employees. It was felt that the painting of walls was too important to outsource and instead should only be done city employees. Currently it costs \$1.7 million to do this service and the Parks Recreation Neighborhood Services (PRNS) Department (which runs this program) estimates it could be done for \$1.1 million which equates to \$600,000 in savings by keeping the service but providing it a different way.

The employees who perform this work have shown up at each budget meeting to speak against the outsourcing. This service is really needed in D5; I witnessed to and from the meeting that there was substantial tagging. The sheer amount of tagging I witnessed gave the appearance that the City does not offer this service today. Speakers at the meeting felt that city staff would work harder than a private contractor. One option might be to outsource half of the city to a private contractor and the other half to city employees and judge it in a year. However, this would not generate the total savings needed to balance the department budget and thus provide this service.

The savings in outsourcing park maintenance looks even higher. The current cost for only maintaining small parks under two acres and park bathrooms is \$4.1 million where if it was outsourced it is estimated to be only \$1.3 million for a savings of \$2.8 million.

I understand that some people will lose their current job through outsourcing and may go to work for the private contractor earning less, but the City's responsibility is to provide services for 950,000 residents. The employees who may lose their job did nothing wrong, it's just a sign of the times that the City needs to re-look how it can continue services and save money. The City saved \$4 million last year outsourcing janitorial at the Airport and City Hall and everything is just as clean.

Last week, at the District 7 (D7) budget meeting, a career Navy veteran advocated for opening the Seven Trees library, which is completed but not yet open. However he went on to say that there should be immediate changes to the pension system. He mentioned how he receives a 30 percent pension for 25 years serving our country in the military.

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